

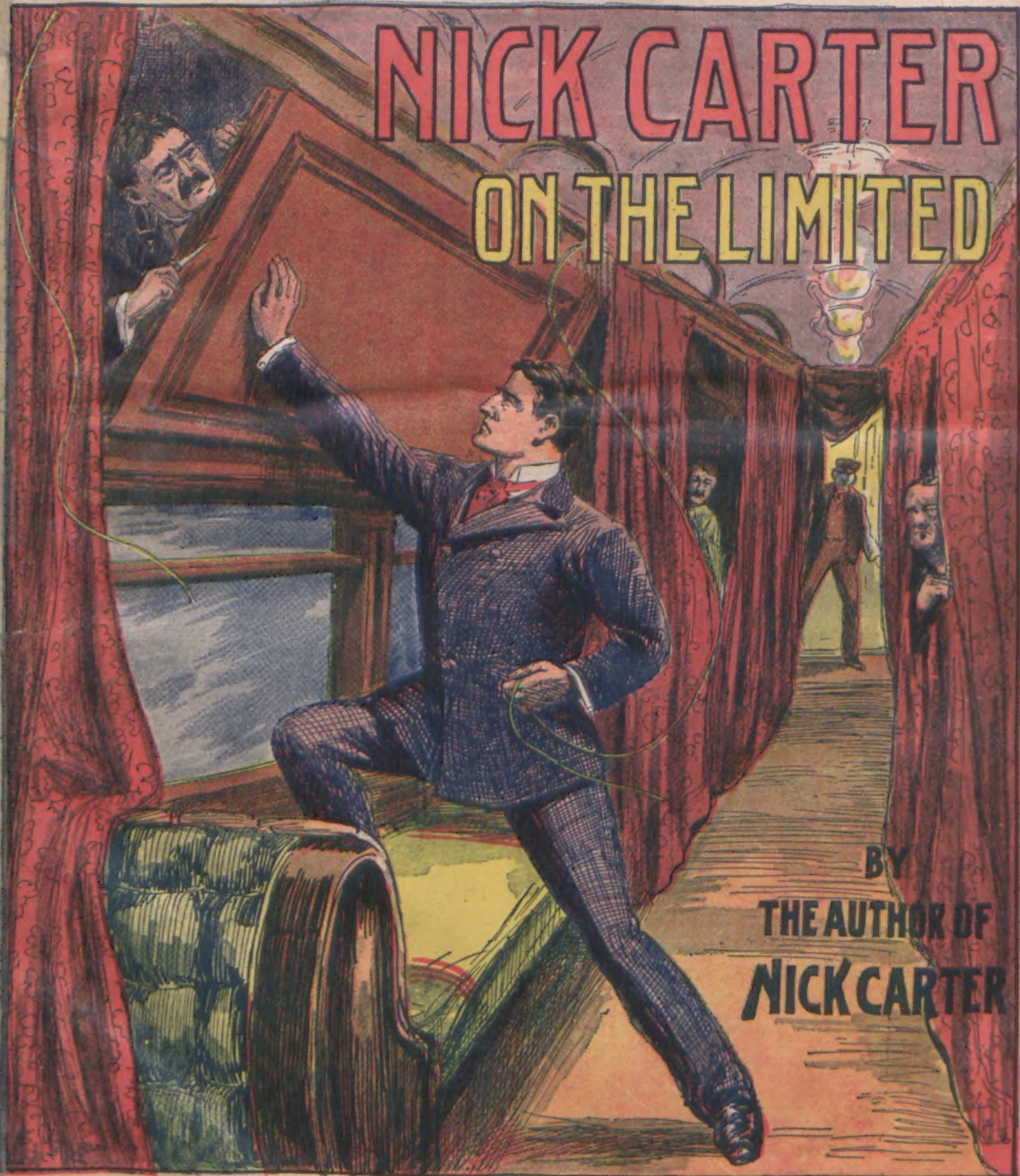
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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NICK CARTER ON THE LIMITED



BY
THE AUTHOR OF
NICK CARTER

NICK PUSHED UP THE UPPER BERTH, CATCHING THE VILLAIN BY THE NECK.

THE LIMITED

NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

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Nick Carter on the Limited

OR, THE

MAN IN THE SMOKER WHO DIDN'T SMOKE

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

THE TRANSPARENCY SIGNAL.

"N—I—C—K——"

Nick Carter, New York's most famous detective, suddenly halted in a stroll down the Bowery.

It was night, and Chick, the secret service man's wide-awake assistant, was with him.

"Ah!" commented Chick, expressively, his glance alighting on the object indicated by the eye of his chief.

"That sign!"

"I see."

"N—I—C—K——"

"It's queer!"

Nick Carter drew back into the doorway of a store closed for the evening.

He ran his eye over the street, and up and down the front of a building directly opposite.

"Design," he speculated, "or accident?"

"It tallies, doesn't it?" asked Chick, with energy.

"Well—yes."

"A plain word from Patsy, I'm thinking?"

"Possibly."

"I feel sure of it."

"Let us consider," said Nick, in his brisk but careful way. "We are looking for a man——"

"The Spider."

"Alias Guild Beham."

"A man, you declare," said Chick, "whose capture is essential to our peace of mind and professional satisfaction."

"Just so, and the welfare of the general public."

"You drove him out of Chicago——"

"I believe he is in New York, and—I am bound to get him!"

"Which settles the Spider!" predicted Chick, with emphatic confidence.

"I started Patsy out to investigate a hint as to a likely crowd this fellow might train with," went on Nick, as if talking to himself. "His search would naturally narrow down to just about this part of the Bowery, I fancy."

"He has not reported," remarked Chick.

"When Patsy doesn't report," observed Nick, "he's waiting."

"And when Patsy is waiting," said Chick, "he anticipates what you may do—he knows you would follow in his tracks, fearing a slip from his absence."

"Admirable logic, Chick!"

"So, here we are; and there——"

Chick pointed.

"'N—I—C—K——'" read Nick Carter once more, and for the third time.

"A clear invitation! Take my word for it, Patsy is in or about that building," insisted Chick.

"We'll assume it," agreed the veteran detective. "Take a preliminary survey, Chick."

"Let you know how things size up?"

"Exactly."

Without further ado, the detective's nimble assistant darted down the street, leaving Nick standing in the shadowed doorway.

This it was that had stayed the footsteps of the famous detective and his assistant——

A transparency sign running out from the top of the building now under Nick's inspection.

It was one of those cheap clouded glass affairs so common that it would be only prominent and noticeable to a person experienced in noting strange things.

It therefore did not escape Nick Carter's attention, for his eyes were always open for the usual and unusual alike.

Originally the sign had read: "Nickel Beds."

The first word comprised the upper line.

It now read, plainly and only:

"N—I—C—K——"

Its two last letters were not visible.

Had they been broken out, Nick would have paid but brief attention to his discovery.

They had been covered up, however, at the cost of risk, labor and patience—all three.

Even at the distance he was, the detective could see that a piece of tarred roofing paper had been tucked into the framework of the sign so as to purposely and perfectly obscure those two letters.

Some one, it was apparent, had crept out from the roof and had effected this obliteration, for a reason.

It was as pertinent a piece of business, to the detective's way of "reading signs," as if Patsy had suddenly stuck his head out of one of those top-story windows and had said:

"This is the building. Here is your game. Come in."

Nick knew locality and structure in a general way.

When Chick returned, at the end of ten minutes, he knew so much more about it in detail that his eye sparkled like that of an expert hunter introduced into a promising hunting field.

"It's a hard joint that building," reported Chick.

"I knew that," nodded his superior.

"A novice takes his life into his hands when exploring there too boldly.

"A hotbed of vice!"

"And crime!"

"Give us the criminal aspect, Chick."

"That drinking attachment is a regular headquarters for fleecers."

"I have noticed the gentry since standing here."

"They sally out, rob a victim or run him up against some of the swindling games inside. If hunted up, they vanish."

"Where?"

"They've got a burrow back of that bar-room."

"So?"

"But only for the elect."

"You tried to penetrate?"

"Of course."

"And was rebuffed?"

"I didn't have the password."

"Ah! that's the way they work it, eh?"

Nick pursed his lips up sapiently.

"That is about the sort of environment a man of the Spider's shady calibre would seek," he suggested.

"Just."

"I must get a peep into this secret den."

"Patsy may have preceded?"

"So much the better. Yes, I must see the inside of things. Come along."

Nick turned face-about from the spot at a brisk pace.

Chick read his purpose without asking what it was.

Nick led the way to one of his numerous "depots of convenience."

Such places had always handy the suitable requirements for hasty disguise.

When they sallied forth, after the lapse of half an hour, Chick piloted the way.

Made up as a typical Bowery habitue of the rougher class, he kept with Nick long enough to receive definite instructions.

Then he forged ahead, preceding him to what had become the direct scene of action for the evening's detective work.

Nick sauntered down the Bowery, quite "the easy mark" on sight for confidence man and ropers-in.

He had made up as a countryman—rather, however, as the rural merchant than the rank stripe of hayseed.

He had adopted a verdancy exactly proportioned to the men he intended to deal with.

Nearing the building that his assistant

had so recently investigated, Nick began to "lay around loose."

He shied clear of the general run of fleecers, and deftly threw himself under the notice of a trio sallying forth from the saloon in search of victims.

The three instantly spotted him. They held a consultation at a distance, while Nick studied a revolving electric light in a show window as if it were the most wonderful spectacle of his life.

"Look here!" a voice abruptly challenged him.

Nick turned smartly.

"Why, you shocked me suddenly!" he said, staring with apprehension.

The smooth intruder hooked Nick's arm confidentially.

"Talk low," he whispered.

"Eh!"

"And quick. See here. You noticed those two fellows at the curb?"

"Friends of yours?"

"We're three boys from Yale."

"Oh!"

"Doing the town."

"So am I! so am I!" declared Nick, with enthusiasm—with a proud glance at the revolving light.

"I see you are. Those two chums of mine have got off one or two cheap practical jokes on me during the evening."

"Sho!"

"And I want to get even."

"That's right, stranger!"

"I am a stranger—that's how you can help me."

"How's that?"

"I've bet those two fellows that I can come to a perfect stranger—you—and borrow five dollars on sight without trouble."

Nick slapped his hand over his pocket.

"Why, you see——" he gasped in alarm, seeming to turn pale.

"Oh, I don't really want to borrow it."

Nick expressed a sigh of relief.

"Although you give it to me. You

see, they bet twenty dollars. I win the bet."

"But——"

"And I divide with you. I give you ten of it. See?"

"Why—yes. Grand!" cried Nick, getting excited.

"You'll do it?"

"Of course I'll do it, but, say!"

"Well?"

"Suppose this is a trick to cheat me?"

"Sir, do you mean to insult me—a Yale collegian?"

"No, but——"

"Why! if I ran away one yell would bring half a dozen bluecoats at my heels, wouldn't it?"

"That's so—I didn't mean anything. There's your money."

Nick took out and tendered a five dollar bill.

The "Yale collegian" walked over to his fellows.

He slapped them, he rallied them, he flaunted the borrowed bank-note triumphantly in their faces.

One of them handed him two ten dollar bills.

Chuckling and crowing, the winner of the bet came back to Nick.

"There you are, and thanks!" he said. "I've got even with those fellows at last!"

The three promptly disappeared. Nick Carter "winked to himself."

He saw at a glance that the ten dollar bill was a counterfeit.

Nick was willing to pay his way, however.

He now cast about for the chance to get five dollars' worth of experience out of his investment.

At the door of the saloon half a dozen hangers-on were grinning at the extravagant delight manifested on his face over such easily-earned money.

Nick went straight up to them, with the greenhorn's artless innocence.

"Come in, come in," he invited, effusively, "and help me celebrate!"

The crowd filed up to the bar.

Nick, with a lightning glance from under his bushy eyebrows, made sure that Chick was at his post.

The latter sidled up with the others, at the end of the line, and leaning on the counter near to the barkeeper.

"What you celebrating, captain?" inquired one of the crowd.

"Just made ten dollars."

"Hi!"

"Picked it up—floated right into my hands!"

"Bet, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"You're lucky."

The crowd "ordered"—Nick called for cider and got pop.

"Take it out of that, barkeep!" said Nick, flipping the ten dollar bill on the counter.

The bartender shot a mere glance at the banknote; he pushed it back with a scowl.

He had heard the conversation, and he "identified" the bill.

"None of that!" he growled.

"Eh?" stared Nick.

"It's queer."

"Wasn't it queer, now!" beamed Nick, "just picked it up, as I told you."

"You pick it up now, and give me good money!"

"Eh?"

"It's counterfeit."

"W-w-what!" roared Nick.

His face looked as if he were about to cry; he stared at the bank-bill on the counter as if paralyzed.

The bartender put on his ugliest look, and was about to hurry up payment with some rough threat, when the disguised Chick gave him a nod and a wink.

"What do you want?" demanded the bartender, in a surly tone.

Chick beckoned him out of earshot of the others.

"A spec, partner!" he whispered.

"What are you getting at?"

"Are you getting paresis, to let a rich graft like that slip through your fingers?"

"I don't see it!"

"Don't you!" retorted Chick—"that fellow's got a big wad."

"Likely."

"Of real money."

"Well, the gang will see to that—I sell drinks, I do."

"No, the gang won't get it," dissented Chick, definitely, "for he hasn't it with him, the counterfeit business will sicken and scare him, and he'll make tracks brisk——"

"Oh, well, let him!"

"Unless you stop him."

"Me stop him!"

"It's a hundred dollars apiece for you and I."

"Eh?"

"No less!"

"Say! don't be so mysterious."

"Plainly, then, you let me work it—on shares."

"Blame me, if I see what you're getting at. But go ahead."

Chick whispered some directions into the bartender's ear.

The latter looked enlightened and amused. He stepped along the counter and snatched up the bank bill.

"Say, mister," he observed to Nick, with a freezing glance, "I want a little private conversation with you."

"Do you?" said Nick, stupidly.

"Very particular—you come this way."

Nick was a picture of bewilderment and fright as he was led to the end of the bar-room.

Chick accompanied the bartender; they hedged Nick into a corner.

"Do you see that bill!" demanded the barkeeper, fluttering it fiercely before Nick's face.

"Of course I see it!"

"It's counterfeit."

"So you said before, and I'm just knocked off my pins!"

"You tried to pass it."

"I thought it was genuine."

"Thinking don't do!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I am going to give you in charge."

"Hey! What! me?"

"For passing counterfeit money."

"Me a counterfeiter!"

"You are—in the eyes of the law."

"Yes," put in Chick, "and you'll get ten years in Sing Sing, at the very least."

"Oh, say—look here! I'm an honest man——"

"Hold on, partner—don't go for a policeman just yet," dissuaded Chick, grabbing the arm of the bartender, who, a monument of virtuous indignation, started as if to do that same.

"No! no!" flustered Nick—"the disgrace would kill my folks. I am innocent!"

"Let me suggest," proceeded Chick, smoothly. "Our friend is in a fix."

"I guess I am!"

"I know you are!"

"Let him square it."

"Yes, yes—let me square it! let me square it!" pleaded Nick, who was shaking from head to foot.

"You pay two hundred dollars and we'll not enter the complaint," continued Chick.

"Two hundred!" exclaimed Nick.

"Dollars."

"I won't!"

"Then you go to jail."

"Yes—I won't fool, I'll get an officer——" began the bartender, moving toward the front door again.

"Don't go—I'll do it, I'll have to do it!" groaned Nick.

"Pay up, then!"

"I haven't it with me."

"Have you it at all?"

"Yes, at my hotel."

"Send for it!"

Nick moaned and mumbled. He wrote an order on the clerk of a hotel in Brooklyn.

He passed it to Chick with an expression on his face as if he were about to die.

"This is awful—awful!" he gasped, mopping his brow in a frenzied way.

"You go for that money," directed the bartender to Chick. "You come this way," to Nick.

He unlocked a door at the rear.

"Go in there!"

"Say!" demurred Nick.

"You ain't going to have any chance to slip out till that money comes, if I know it!"

"I don't want to—I won't! Say——"

Nick put up a weak but exciting fight, but allowed the bartender to have his way.

He was hustled into a small room with a vigorous push.

Nick's eyes snapped in the darkness.

"Just where I wanted to be. Now to work!" the detective said to himself, ardently.

CHAPTER II.

A KEEN TRAIL.

Nick Carter struck a match.

There was one small window in the room, protected by an inside shutter.

The detective unbolted this. A network of slim bars showed beyond. Nick had the rusted barrier out of place inside of five minutes' time.

In two more he had squeezed through the window and dropped to a stone pavement eight feet below.

The detective found himself in a narrow, dark court.

Except for the window of the room through which he had just crept, there

was no aperture in the four blank, solid walls less than twenty feet from the ground.

About that distance up a light showed, vacillating between dimness and brilliancy according as the wind fluttered the lowered opaque shade of an open window.

Nick tried to get his eyes used to the darkness, and began a more critical inspection.

"My prison place was evidently not the anteroom of admission!" he soliloquized. "I see no mode of exit this way."

Nick half stumbled as he spoke the words.

He stooped to examine the obstacle.

"A ladder," he said.

It was a short, light ladder, such as is used by lamplighters, roofers and the like.

From its end there dangled some four or five feet of stout rope.

Nick had just discovered that this looked as if it had been recently rudely cut or broken apart, when his arm was touched.

He turned in a flash.

"Patsy!" reported a low voice.

"Ah! good!" said Nick, with satisfaction surveying the form in the gloom. "How did you get in here, Patsy?"

"Not in, but down here."

Nick cast his eyes aloft.

"Yes, from the roof," explained Patsy.

"I let myself down to investigate."

"What with?"

"A rope. It was too short. I tied it on the ladder."

"And it broke."

"Landing me here."

"Are you hurt?"

"Only shaken up a bit."

"You fixed that 'nickel' sign, then?"

"Oh, sure!"

"It was clever. What else have you done?"

"There are two men here who know the Spider."

"But not the Spider himself?"

"I fancy not."

"You have not seen him?"

"No."

"And these two men?"

"I saw them, and overheard them through an open window—I was on the roof. This was about dark."

"What room was it?"

Patsy pointed to the lighted one with the flapping shade.

"Very good," said Nick. "I will go up and take a look into it."

The detective set the ladder almost straight up against the wall, but it came short of the lowermost window.

Even by stepping on its top round he could not so much as reach the sill with his finger tips.

"No use—come down," said Patsy.

"No use—that way."

"But this?"

"Yes."

Patsy planted himself against the brick wall, and raised the ladder so that it rested on his shoulders.

"Now then!"

"One minute first," said Nick.

He explained his own predicament and Chick's share in it. Then he added:

"You had better get back into the room I just left."

"After you are aloft—very good," acquiesced Patsy. "But——"

"Well?"

"What will they say?"

"At the metamorphosis?"

"Yes."

"You must find a way out of that."

"Easy!" replied Patsy, with confidence.

"I will fix it, though, so you will have a saving clause if too hard-pressed."

"All right."

"I will tie the rope to the shutter hinge up there."

Nick went aloft—first ascending to Patsy's shoulders, and then up the ladder.

He could now reach the window sill of the lighted room.

Nick attached the rope. Then he gently lifted the curtain.

There was a bed in the room into which the detective looked.

Upon it lay a man in his clothes. His loud snoring indicated that he was slumbering profoundly.

Nick lifted himself to the window sill, pressed in the shade, and dropped to a carpeted floor.

A gas jet burned brightly. His eye on the bed, Nick crawled over toward it.

He came erect behind its high head—there he stood reflecting seriously.

Nick had got into the secret lair of a desperate crowd of criminals, he understood—well on the trail of his man, the Spider, he hoped.

Besides, exploring mystery, it was the province of the expert detective to often cure many social ills.

Much the same as does a skilled surgeon remove dangerous outgrowths to save the general human frame, Nick felt called upon when occasion required to cut out social cancers.

This Spider had been concerned in a great case of fraud in Chicago.

Nick had unearthed the crime and defeated its workings, but its main operator had the good luck to escape.

He was a dangerous person to leave at large. Receiving an intimation that he was in New York City, the detective had set the wires to trap him.

If anywhere in the metropolis—from pointers received and clues diligently followed—the notorious Spider must be living with the gang under the present roof, Nick felt persuaded.

The detective looked about the room, locating its entrance and exits.

He listened, too, for some sounds that would serve as a guide as to the occupancy or non-occupancy of apartments adjoining on either side.

Nick was just about to step from cover when the door of the room opened.

The detective dodged down and pressed well under the bed.

A man had entered the room without the least warning of his coming, the detective discerned, because he happened to be in his stocking feet.

"Wake up!" he shouted, going to the man on the bed and shaking the slumberer.

"Eh? Oh! Belton!"

"Yes—it's me."

"What——"

"You wanted to be awakened at eight o'clock."

"That's so—yes, yes."

"I'm going."

"Where?"

"To see some friends—then to Chicago."

"Oh! of course—regular trip?"

"And a side issue. I shall see the Spider."

"Give him my compliments!"

"I will do so."

"Tell him I'm obliged for his splendid list of likely places to crack."

"Ha! ha! tried some of them?"

"I'm making a systematic tour."

"Is it panning out?"

"Where he hasn't taken off the cream!"

"Well, so long—I shan't be back for a week."

The man went out of the room—the aroused slumberer got out of the bed.

Nick had taken in the information conveyed in the overheard colloquy with considerable disappointment.

The Spider had been in New York; the detective had been right in that conjecture.

But he had left—had gone back to Chicago.

Practically, this ended the matter for the immediate present, so far as Nick was personally concerned.

He did not have the time just now to waste several days for the bare honor of rounding up the notorious Spider.

"I will telegraph my friend, the Chicago Chief of Police, to arrest the man," decided Nick.

"That is, when I find out where in Chicago the Spider is likely to be located," Nick added a second later.

At least two men in this place could probably furnish this specific information, if so inclined—the man who had just left the room and the man who had just got out of the bed.

Nick would have preferred to follow the former, for he was bound direct for Chicago and the Spider.

He had no opportunity of following him, however, so he contented himself with confining his attentions to the man left behind.

His conversation with the fellow he had called Belton had plainly indicated his burglarious instincts.

When he had dressed himself, and, opening a drawer in a bureau, took out a variety of articles, Nick knew that he was bent upon one of his usual night forays.

The man drew a penciled card from his pocket.

He read over several addresses, and he read them aloud.

Finally he came to this one:

"'Isaac Swartz, No. 2 West Twenty-eighth street.'"

"There's a likely plum!" muttered the burglar. "Let's see—the Spider scratched that off afterwards. Why? Is that another place so rich that he worked it himself? Well, he'd touched another I happened on last night, and although he'd taken the cream, I found some pretty fair picking. Swartz—he's my bird for the first shot!"

The burglar proceeded to stow about his person a jimmy, a picklock, a dark lantern, a bunch of keys, several drills, a mask, and a bottle of chloroform.

Nick discerned that he was about to de-

at. He felt that it would pay him to keep track of this fellow.

As the man extinguished the light Nick stole from concealment.

He voted it a rare piece of luck that the man left the building by some secret exit instead of through the saloon.

He did not meet a person through a series of windings and descents.

He came out into the open air at the head of a flight of steps leading from an unused basement.

While Nick might not be able all in a minute to run back the course he had followed, he congratulated himself that he at least knew this secret basement entrance to the den he had just left.

Storing in his mind the acquired experience, for future use or reference, Nick took up the trail of the burglar.

The detective had decided on a specific plan.

He intended to allow this fellow to proceed with his operations until he could take him red-handed in the act of burglary.

This Nick felicitated himself would give him a hold upon the man, whereby he could easily prevail upon him to tell all that he knew about the Spider.

Nick patiently shadowed his game the long distance up to No. — West 28th street.

The house the burglar had selected for spoilation was a plain but solid residence.

A dim light showed in the front room of the first story, but there was no sound or movement traceable about the place.

After satisfying himself that this was the house of Isaac Swartz, while the burglar was reconnoitering it in front Nick slipped around to the rear.

Thus, when the shadowed crook finally began operations, Nick was leisurely watching him from behind a staircase not twenty feet distant.

The burglar chose a window letting in to the rear cellar of the house.

This had a sheet iron shutter, which was secured by a heavy padlock and staple.

The fellow tried his bunch of keys on this, snapped open the padlock, and pulled the shutter ajar.

He disappeared over the sill. Nick heard him drop. Then there came the flare of a dark lantern.

Nick sped to the aperture—he took a rapid, piercing glance down into the cellar.

The burglar was moving the lantern about with the expectation of discovering some steps leading to the next floor.

There were none such. To his disgust, the cracksman had penetrated a coal cellar.

A brick partition shut off the front cellar. In its centre was a thick oaken door.

The man glided to this, pressed it, felt over it.

It was locked on the other side. Nick fancied the man started as though he heard some movement beyond.

The fellow was in a trap, if Nick so elected.

The detective could shut him up in there as tightly as in a prison cell.

Nick gave the iron shutter a swing, and set the padlock.

The burglar had carelessly left his key in its lock.

Nick gave it a turn—the burglar was as tight and snug as iron and stone could make him.

"Caged, my fine fellow!" soliloquized Nick, with satisfaction.

He passed swiftly around to the front of the house.

Nick ran up the stoop leading from the street, and gave the door bell a quick pull.

CHAPTER III.

THE BURGLAR'S CHAMPION.

There was no reply to the detective's sharp summons.

Nick repeated his summons at the bell, and he made the house echo with a noisy jangle as he kept it up.

Finally there was a movement below, in the front basement.

Slowly a light came into view. Then a figure moved along the hall, halting yet nervous.

"Who is there?" quoth the detective in tones.

"Are you Mr. Isaac Swartz?" inquired the detective.

"Yes."

"Open up!"

"Who is it?"

"I have business with you—be speedy!" ordered Nick Carter, peremptorily.

"My dear sir——"

"Don't delay!"

Nick's brisk nature could not brook the reluctant and uncertain methods of the man at the other side of the door.

The detective shook the knob in his impatience. This hastened the other, it seemed, for a bolt was sprung.

The detective faced a weazened old man of Jewish countenance, who regarded him with a strange agitation of manner.

"Now, what is it?" he demanded—"what is it?"

"Well," declared Nick, rapidly, "there is a burglar in your house."

To the detective's surprise, its owner manifested no alarm whatever.

His face was already drained—it did not change in the least.

"Yes, sir—all right, sir," said Swartz.

He turned to close the door.

"Thank you, sir," he added, in a respectful utter.

"Hold on!"

Nick put his foot in the way of the closing door.

"I will attend to him," declared Swartz.

"You will attend to him?"

"Yes, sir."

"I will help you."

"There is no need—I have a revolver.

There is a telephone in the house—I will call the police."

"I am connected with the police."

The old Jew gave a frightened gasp. His teeth chattered and he staggered back from sheer weakness.

"Something under the surface here!" conjectured Nick.

It was his opportunity and he improved it; he slipped into the hall and closed the door behind him.

"Don't—don't come in here!" demurred the Jew, stretching out a hand in feeble remonstrance.

"Oh, but I must!" declared Nick.

"I am easily—easily frightened."

"You don't seem to be—at burglars!"

"I am not—not afraid of them."

"I shall help you to catch this one," promised Nick.

"Catch him?" panted Swartz.

"Certainly. To tell you the truth, Mr. Swartz, I have been watching the fellow for an hour past."

"You were watching him!"

"I locked him into your rear cellar."

"It was you who did that!"

"Ah! you knew he was in the house, then?" inquired Nick, quickly.

"I, that is——"

"Never mind. Lead the way down stairs. I have handcuffs. There is a police station only a few squares distant."

"You must not!"

The old man ran to a door that Nick saw must connect with the cellar.

He planted himself across it, barring it with one arm.

"What does that mean?" queried the surprised detective.

"This is my house."

"Well?"

"I allow no interference!"

"Interference!"

"You must not go below."

"Oh! but I must."

Nick seized Swartz by the shoulder. He was a lightweight, and Nick was gentle with him.

He drew him on one side and he would a child, with one hand.

It was well that the other was free, for suddenly the disputed door was torn open.

A form plunging forward nearly took Nick off his feet.

"Ah!" uttered the detective.

In a grip of iron he seized the intruder.

"Why—the burglar himself!" proclaimed Nick.

"He is no burglar!" chattered Swartz.

"I am no burglar!" indignantly denied the man.

But Nick had recognized him beyond the shadow of a doubt.

He dragged him into the lighted front room.

"Yes," he observed, coolly, "you are the man."

"What man?" growled the fellow, writhing in Nick's grasp.

"Whom I saw force an entrance into the cellar of this house."

"I don't know."

"Oh, no! To decide it, if you are not the burglar in question, then the Simon-pure article is now in the rear cellar. We will go down and see."

"No!" almost screamed Swartz, starting to his feet and throwing out two trembling, objecting hands.

"Why not?"

"I don't know—it—this is the man."

The burglar shot an ominous hiss at the speaker.

"I knew he was."

"But—he is no burglar."

"He is—— Not quick enough, my friend!"

The man writhing in Nick's grasp had made a furtive move.

It was to lift from his pocket a short but heavy piece of a sectional jimmy.

Nick hindered the assault by knocking the treacherous fellow flat over upon a sofa.

"That looks as if he were no burglar, does it?" demanded Nick, sarcastically displaying the piece of steel.

"Well, he is my friend, just the same!" insisted Swartz.

"Invited to the house, I suppose?" asked Nick.

"Certainly."

"He is my friend—I protect him. I will deny all you may assert," cried Swartz, with an air of great excitement.

"I don't believe it."

"I don't believe it."

"I don't believe it."

"I don't believe it."

"I don't believe it."

"I don't believe it."

"I don't believe it."

"I don't believe it."

"I don't believe it."

"I don't believe it."

"Why won't I?"

"I refuse to prosecute him."

"I care nothing for that."

Swartz glanced in a frightened way at the burglar, the latter gritted his teeth.

"You will come with me," Nick said to him.

"Out of the way!" shouted the fellow, desperately.

He had suddenly snatched up a chair. It was done neatly, and Nick dodged.

It was not at the detective, however, that the fellow struck.

He whipped the chair in a circle, and let it drive for the lower sash of the front window.

The sash comprised a single pane, and the whizzing projectile passed through it.

Amid a frightful clatter of shattered glass a great jagged gap was made in the broad sash.

Like an expert somersault performer the burglar dove for it.

He shrieked with pain as he grazed the ragged edges of the glass.

Nick leaped forward, with the intention to follow the fugitive.

"No, no, he's gone! Let him go!" panted a wild voice.

The Jew had sprung upon Nick, and thrown his arm around his body.

He was frail, but the frenzy of desperation nerved him to cling with tenacity.

By the time Nick had thrust him aside, got entirely rid of him, the burglar had struck the ground, regained his feet and vanished like a phantom.

Nick ran to the window, peered out, hesitated, turned back and faced the Jew.

The latter, panting furiously, his eyes dancing with dangerous agitation, sat squeezing his withered hands together.

"Now, sir!" said the detective, sternly, "will you explain this?"

"Explain—what?" gasped Swartz.

"Your remarkable friendship for a criminal."

"It was—it was my wish for him to go free."

"You have done reason?"

"A reason. No, sir. Why should I have?" asked Swartz, sharply.

"You have done reason?"

"I have done reason. He was a thief."

"He was a thief. He was a thief. He was a thief."

lamp he had brought up from the cellar.

Nick took it in his hand.

Swartz must have let the burglar through the doorway in the cellar partition voluntarily, and the detective resolved to make an investigation below to see if he could secure any hint to his mysterious concern for the criminal.

As Nick took two steps down the hall, Swartz was at his side in a bound.

"Where are you going?" he panted.

"Below."

"No! no!" came in a hissing whisper from the Jew's husky throat.

"Yes—I shall."

The old Jew reeled about as though on the verge of a fit.

He struck his forehead with his hands in a maniacal way.

He ran at the door as if to defend it, realized his weakness, and uttered a scream indicative of mental torture.

Finally he fell to his knees.

Clinging to those of the detective—who was slowly analyzing all these remarkable demonstrations—he cried shrilly:

"A hundred, two hundred dollars, if you will leave this house without looking into that cellar!"

"Not for twenty hundred!" retorted Nick Carter, staunchly.

"In the name of mercy——"

"Out of the way, old man!"

"No! no!"

"I am going to have a look!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE SPIDER'S "TRADEMARK."

There was a surfeit of excitement and mystery in the climax of the moment, but Nick Carter preserved his usual calm poise.

The extraordinary agitation of Isaac Swartz was of a piece with his remarkable offer of an enormous bribe.

Nick realized that the simple task of running down a criminal had evolved what promised to be a great mystery.

The detective had temporarily lost sight of the burglar, but his rare professional instinct told him he was likely to capture much bigger game.

Nick released the clinging talons of the frenzied Swartz with some difficulty.

The latter looked like a man facing his last hope.

"Pity!" he pleaded.

"For what?" inquired Nick.

"I am an old man!"

"I respect gray hairs, Mr. Swartz," declared the detective, "but your unaccountable actions——"

"I was driven to it!"

"To what were you driven?"

"To free that man."

"Your 'friend'?"

"I never saw him before."

"Ah?" murmured the detective, skeptically.

"Never!"

"A peculiarly rapid friendship."

"It was not friendship."

"What was it, then?"

"Dread—fear!"

"Of what?"

"It was his life or mine!"

"In what way?"

"The law!" asserted Swartz, with dry, parched lips.

"Then you, too, are a criminal?"

"Not at heart—not at heart—I swear it! I am a hopeless, ruined, unhappy old man—spare me!"

Nick was becoming interested.

"Mr. Swartz," he said, "suppose we go below."

A great sob shook the spare frame of the Jew.

He threw up his hands in a submissive way.

"You will not relent?" he moaned.

"I must look over your cellar arrangements here. No—you must go with me."

There was a gleam of despair in Swartz's eyes. Nick saw that this man, driven to the verge of insanity by some absorbing fear, was in a frame of mind to do himself mischief.

"Well—let it come!" gasped Swartz, his head drooping on his breast; he was a broken man.

Nick opened the door, and Swartz staggered down the steps. The detective sniffed sharply.

"Kensine!" he mentally muttered.

Then as both reached the cellar, the lamp quivered in Nick Carter's hand as its rays illumined a strikingly suggestive scene.

Half a dozen barrels filled with shavings and waste paper stood about the cellar.

These had been saturated with kerosene.

Nick's face hardened as he read the situation in all its glaring hideousness.

"A firebug, eh!" he sternly observed.

Swartz had sunk to a stool. He sat there, a piteous object, his head drooped, his hands clasped torturingly—and silent.

"Speak!" ordered the detective. "You were about to fire this building?"

"Yes," came reluctantly in reply.

"That trapped burglar, through a crack in that connecting door, read your design, as I have traced it?"

"He did."

"He realized that some outsider—he probably reasoned that it was a watchman—had shut him in. He demanded that you give him liberty this way?"

"Yes."

"Or he would expose your meditated crime?"

The old Jew nodded again.

"My friend, this is terribly serious!"

Nick had come on the scene in time to save considerable property.

With the start those combustibles would give, the entire house was likely to be consumed.

His companion, directing a wild-eyed glance at the detective's face, read only the menace and majesty of the law there.

He shuddered as Nick touched his shoulder.

"Proceed up stairs again," the detective tersely ordered.

"What—what are you going to do with me?" demanded Swartz, as they reached the main hall.

"Can you ask?"

The old man shuddered as if the disaster of his situation was crushing him.

"It is already ruin!" he hoarsely muttered. "It will be shame, reproach, a father's fall! Ah, well—it will not last long—I can die!"

"What tempted you?" demanded Nick.

"Tempted?" cried Swartz. "I was not tempted!"

"Indeed! what do you call it?"

"I was driven!"

"By what?"

"Necessity."

"For necessity of—"

"Of calling a great loss."

"What loss?"

"I may as well confess—it will all come out!"

"Yes."

"Come with me."

There was a little room off from the hall, a sort of study.

This was fitted up as an office. Into it, turning on the gas, Isaac Swartz led his visitor—his guardian now.

He took up a letter copying book, and, opening it, indicated that the detective should read several letters there.

They were to four different insurance companies dated the day previous, instructing them to cancel the various policies existing on the residence of the writer.

"Why did you do that?" demanded Nick, in profound surprise.

"Because I am an honest man!"

"You would not have benefited by a fire?"

"Not a dollar!"

Nick studied the old man, wondering if there was not a strain of insanity in him.

"Then I fail to see your motive in destroying this property," said Nick.

"Yet I had a motive," said Swartz, drearily.

"Will you tell me what it was?"

"I will tell you what it was," acceded the old man.

He threw back a double drapery, revealing an alcove.

The first thing that struck the detective's eye was evidently the very thing to which Swartz wished to direct his attention.

It was a large gold frame that held no picture.

But it had held one; Nick's glance instantly detected the ragged edges of a canvas recently cut from place.

He half guessed what was coming, but he said, inquisitively:

"Well?"

"Less than a week ago the picture that frame contained was cut from it."

"A picture of value?"

"Of great value, of extraordinary value—and rarity."

"I understand. Why was it destroyed?"

"It was not destroyed."

"Removed, then?"

"Yes. It was stolen."

"By a burglar?"

"Yes."

Nick was wrestling mentally with some decidedly singular problems.

"He came in at that window," said Swartz, pointing dejectedly. "I have not much of value; he must have been a connoisseur."

"The picture——"

"Was a genuine Murillo. He removed it, carefully and coolly; here he leisurely piled up those stools, there he supported himself by that wire hanging from the picture molding."

Nick nodded that he was taking in the explanations made.

"There the vandal—the vandal!" cried the old man—"there, see! He rested his big splotch of a hand on the wall."

"Ah!" exclaimed Nick Carter, pressing forward diligently.

A hand covered thick with black dust had indeed left its imprint on the wall.

Nick Carter fixed his eyes upon it.

Then, taking a pencil from his pocket, he placed it across the outstretched top of the hand.

Above the pencil one plain finger tip ran fully two inches.

"Yes, the burglar left that clew to his identity," said Nick, aloud.

He added to himself:

"I know him—it was the Spider."

Nick Carter knew that it was the Spider who had stolen Isaac Swartz's Murillo, because the hand imprint showed a decided peculiarity.

The Spider was noted for three of things: His right ear had two notches on the lower lobe; his right cheek bore a scarlet birthmark like a dwarf crysanthemum; the forefinger of his left hand was fully two inches longer than the middle finger.

And from this, the conversation Nick had overheard between the burglar and the man he had called Belton was of itself self-evident.

The Spider had been seized this place; doubtless he was now in Chicago with the police.

There was nothing of his reputation to be lost.

So he told him on to the conclusion of his strange and striking narrative.

"Now, Mr. Swartz," said the detective, "will you please to describe this stolen picture and to do with me?"

"It has everything to do with it," responded Swartz.

"Indeed?"

"That picture was entrusted to me by a friend—an art enthusiast, who unearthed it in Germany a few months since and expended his entire fortune for its possession."

"Why was it entrusted to you?"

"To exhibit and to sell, if possible. My friend lies ill. Were he to know the truth, to learn of its abstraction, I think the shock would kill him, and I think he would doubt me."

"Why would he doubt you?"

"It is the fatality of my race to be distrusted!"

"And you wished to convey the impression that it was destroyed by fire?"

"Overwhelmed with my trouble over its loss, that suggestion rooted itself in my brain."

"It seems incredible!"

Nick did not pause to analyze the mystery of the promptings and impulses of the human mind.

He believed Swartz's story, but he was old, shattered, more fearful of being accused for the sharp trickery sometimes attributed to people of his race, than of facing poverty, death itself.

He sat abject and crushed when his confession was completed.

"I suppose you are going to have me jailed," he said, brokenly.

"Not until I have recovered that picture."

"What!" glared the Jew.

"I think I can safely promise it within a week."

"Sir!" painfully gasped Swartz, "do not trifle with a broken spirit!"

"Ten days, at the most."

"You promise that?"

"I do."

"If that could be—?—it could be—?" began Swartz in an agony of agitation.

He could proceed no further, his emotions nearly suffocating him.

Nick knew his duty plainly, and did it. He told Swartz all that was necessary for him to know.

With advice, direction and encouragement commingled, the old man gave a different bearing to the story he had told. He had been an art enthusiast.

Nick assisted him in putting the cellar combustibles out of harm's way, and advised him to close up the house and stay with some friend till he heard from him again.

"Yes, for that burglar has a hold on me!" murmured Swartz.

"None."

"But he may visit me—to threaten, to extort money!"

"I shall see that he does not."

Nick went home; Patsy and Chick were both there.

After Nick had left the Bowery, Patsy had crept up to the window of the burglar's room as the light went out.

He inferred that Nick had left the place, and was shadowing somebody.

He found his way out of the building, and waited about the saloon till he made a connection with Chick.

They now listened to Nick's story with wide-awake interest.

"It's Chicago, then?" readily surmised Chick.

"Chicago and the Spider—yes," assented the detective.

"And the stolen Murillo?"

"I shall take the first train," said Nick.

"Wait!" interrupted Chick—"I have just remembered."

He proceeded to a table and picked up a card.

"What is that?" inquired Nick.

"Left just before you came."

It was from the president of one of the great railway systems connecting the East with the West.

"If you are going to Chicago," remarked Chick, "that looks like a free pass, doesn't it?"

"Indeed, indeed."

"Well, then, that is settled."

"Dear Mr. Carter: Please come to me without delay. Important. Would like to have you prepare to make the round trip—New York, Chicago—on the first train."

CHAPTER V.

NICK CARTER ON THE LIMITED.

The railroad official who had sent for the famous detective was one of Nick Carter's oldest and closest friends.

He had noted on the card where he would await Nick up to nine o'clock that evening.

It was very nearly that hour now, and Nick bustled about with energy.

He continued to talk briskly while he packed a satchel from the contents of his wardrobe.

"You will get track and keep track of that burglar, Chick," directed Nick.

"I will find him at the Bowery haunt."

"Presumably. You might keep an eye on old Isaac Swartz, Patsy."

"I'll do that."

"Your address in Chicago," queried Chick, "will be——"

"Ida."

"Ah! I see."

"I shall wire her before I leave New York," said Nick.

"Yes, she will be interested to know that Guild Benham, alias the Spider, is back in Chicago. She may take a flyer hunting him up herself!" intimated Chick.

"It would not be unlike her," suggested Patsy, who had the profoundest faith in the extraordinary ability of Nick Carter's gifted "lady detective."

"It is not so much on that account I shall telegraph," said Nick. "You know it was on a Chicago case we unmasked the Spider and drove him into hiding?"

"I understand," assented Chick, "and you think he may be heading back there for something connected with the old case?"

"Why, yes—it is not impossible," declared the detective. "You see, he was not only working to get big pay from a villain for abducting one Leslie Burton——"

"In which you foiled him!"

"But he was in love with pretty Grace Nordyke, Burton's fiancée. They are soon to be married, and Ida happens to be Miss Nordyke's guest at present. I shall wire Ida to warn her friends to look out for Guild Benham."

"Until you arrive to look in on him!" supplemented Patsy, with a chuckle.

"Oh, by the way!" said Chick, as Nick started to leave the room, "you had better hold ourselves in readiness here for an hour or two."

Nick saw his assistant's point.

"That might be well," he assented.

"you are thinking of the railroad president?"

"Yes—you see, he evidently has a case for you."

"Involving a trip to Chicago, he states," said Nick.

"That dovetails with your original intention, of course," acknowledged Chick, "but the two cases might be more than you would care to handle, so——"

"Expect a call or a wire if I find things getting away from me," nodded Nick, disappearing.

The direction from the railroad president made the appointment at the depot.

Nick entered the depot to find that consequential personage pacing the floor nervously, and watching the various entrances with the anxiety of any ordinary traveler awaiting a friend.

"It's a case, and an important one," soliloquized Nick, as he read the official's face.

The latter grasped Nick's hand with a good deal of fervor.

"Was just about to give you up," he observed, with a sigh of immense satisfaction. "I had you come here instead of home or to the general offices, because it was 'on the spot or nothing.'"

"This is 'the spot,' isn't it?" insinuated Nick, smiling.

"Yes, and—not much time to lose!" said the railroad president, consulting his watch.

"Not if it's the limited."

"It is."

"For Chicago?"

"For Chicago."

"You wish me to make the trip?"

"I am very anxious to have you do."

"Call it done," assured the detective. "What is the trouble?"

"Wait a moment, and you shall know."

The railroad president ran up a stairway to the train dispatcher's office.

Then he held a hurried consultation with the depot master.

He was getting excited, and Nick did not like it at all, as he noticed that the president's brisk hustling about was attracting considerable general attention.

However, he was back at Nick's side in a few moments.

"Everything ready!" he breathlessly announced. "This way!"

He led the detective into the ticket office, both being obsequiously bowed to its best chairs by the man in charge.

"Now, then?" questioned Nick, with animation.

"Only eight minutes!"

"Talk fast!"

"Well, you see—my head is getting confused with all this turmoil!"

"And to the point!"

"Don't catch me up so sharp, Carter!"

"Time is precious."

"I'm not used to it."

"As president of a great railway system, probably not—as a mere client of Nick Carter, however——"

"Humph!"

"Come!" rallied Nick, bracing up his companion with a friendly shake; "get your wits together."

"You've started me! Very well, last week's limited runs cost us four thousand dollars in extras."

"How's that?"

"Money thrown away!"

"Don't befog things! What do you mean?"

"Just what I say—the limited was robbed three times last week, and we had to indemnify the victims so as to hush the scandal."

"Robbed?"

"I say so!"

"A hold-up?"

"Oh, no—polite and refined sneak thievery."

"Be more explicit."

"Why! during the trips East and West, eleven different passengers were robbed of various amounts."

"Their purses?"

"Diamonds, clothing—in some instances, their traveling bags."

Nick was a trifle surprised at the wholesale aspect of the affair.

"How was it done?" he inquired.

"That is what I want you to find out."

"I see—very good. You think the same trick may be turned on the present run?"

"Why not? It's a rich field. The game was successful last week, and no one detected."

"Nor suspected?"

The official shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Whom can we suspect?" he asked.

"The train hands——"

"We have time-tried and reliable crews."

"Then some especial passenger—but I will find out that. Three minutes left—tell me what else you know."

"Just this: Our special officers have watched, even secretly searched and examined the effects of the possible plunderers."

"No result?"

"They shadowed home every suspicious-looking passenger on Saturday's trip, and, as you say—no result! Why, Carter! pocket-books were taken from under pillows, diamond studs cut out from shirt buttons."

"What were the porter and conductor doing?"

"Watching—one at each end of the car, that night."

"And they saw no one acting suspiciously?"

"They did not even see a person leave a berth from midnight till morning."

Nick was interested. Further than that, he was stimulated, aroused, at the prospect of something out of the common to enliven his journey to Chicago.

He might be able to kill two birds with one stone—and one on the wing.

"I will make the run," he told the official, "only—I have business in Chicago."

"Well, what of that?"

"It may take up an hour—it may consume a week."

"H'm!"

"So, my return may not be speedy."

"I don't like that!"

"But, one day or one month, I agree to make my report only when I have run down the perpetrator of these mysterious speculations."

"Ah, that is different!" brightened up the railroad president. "You're due!"

"Yes—the limited is starting."

The warning bell and the conductor's last hail of "All aboard!" sounded.

Nick started to leave his companion's side, when the latter grabbed his arm forcibly.

"Wait! hold on! one minute, Carter!"

He started, fishing into various pockets.

"Be speedy!"

The train was moving, and the official ran along with Nick to keep up with him.

"Quick, whatever it is!" ordered Nick, sharply.

Sharply, too, he noticed a man at a distance keeping trace of every move they made.

Nick had no time to investigate him, but he was certain that this person knew him and was watching both of them.

The railroad president was pursy and short of breath.

He was growing fairly hysterical with excitement and suspense, but finally he produced a key.

"That's it!" he panted.

"That's what?" challenged Nick.

"I have had the superintendent's special coach hooked on."

"Ah!" nodded Nick comprehendingly.

"To be run through to meet a party in Chicago."

"Good idea!" conceded Nick.

"That's the key, if you should need to use it."

"Excellent! Good-by. I wish there had been less public fuss and feathers!"

Nick said this to himself, with a shrewd backward glance at the man he had noted watching them.

He saw this fellow stare fixedly after him as he shot past the ticket taker.

Nick fancied the man then turned toward the telegraph office.

There was no time to investigate, no one at hand to put at shadowing a person whom Nick intuitively mistrusted.

The detective dashed up to the splendid vestibuled palaces on wheels, barely in time.

He swung aboard, got into the coach next to the last, and dropped into its rear seat.

Nick leisurely took in his environment; the coach he was in was pretty full.

Next behind, and the last of the train, was the private car, locked and shaded, dark and silent as the tomb.

"That will serve as my dressing-room, if occasion requires!" smiled Nick to himself. "If I had known before leaving home just what the president wanted, I would have put in an appearance in a somewhat different guise."

The detective said this because it naturally occurred to him that if regular crooks were concerned in the limited robbery, they were fairly certain to know Nick Carter by sight.

The last man in the car, and as yet seen by few if any of the passengers, Nick wondered if he could not arrange to get into immediate retirement and effect a disguise without delay.

He impatiently awaited a chance to hail the porter who was at the other end of the car and have his section made up.

The president had provided Nick with transportation.

Nick noticed that the section appropriated him was about the centre of the car.

As he observed this, tracing it by the silver designating numbers, Nick also made another discovery.

A man facing him had his eyes fixed upon the detective.

Keenly, darkly, suspiciously, they swept Nick's face.

The next moment the man was looking out of the window, but something in that momentary flash of those piercing eyes haunted Nick Carter.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MAN WHO DIDN'T SMOKK.

The keen-eyed passenger suddenly turned his back to Nick.

The detective studied his head; he might be a stock broker or a gambler, a slick politician or a common, every-day thief.

As Nick recalled this man's face, however, he retained one impression: Whoever, whatever the fellow was, he was what is known as "foxy."

That keen glance of his at the detective had started up Nick's suspicions.

He determined to watch him for a while, and make acquaintance doubly sure.

The conductor came into the car. Following him came the porter, who made necessary inquiries of the passengers.

Nick had got to his right section now directly behind the occupant of "six."

The porter politely addressed "six."

"Will you have your section made up, sir?" he inquired.

"Yes, you can make it up."

Nick Carter's eyes glistened—he knew that man.

But he repressed any emotion, for the recognition and the presence of this man here were quite natural events.

The man in No. Six was the fellow the burglar had called "Belton" at the Bowery resort.

He was the man whom Nick had plainly heard talking, but he had not plainly seen him, because at the juncture of his appearance Nick had been forced to hide under the bed.

Nick recalled that Belton had announced his intention of at once leaving for Chicago.

On one of his "regular trips," too—and the detective felt himself in great luck; they had "struck" the same train!

Nick entertained some inspiring thoughts as he considered the character of this fellow Belton, and knew that he was bound for Chicago and for the Spider.

"I never saw things hitch more finely," ruminated the detective, with gratification. "The only question is: Does that man know me?"

This was a question. It might be possible that Belton had simply scanned Nick as he would any man with a strikingly strong or suggestive face.

It was natural that he should be constantly on the alert; being a crook, and if he were much of a crook, Nick well knew he must have the ability to pick out those whose presence intuitively warned him to fight shy and look sharp.

Nick pretended to be absorbed in a newspaper, but he watched every movement of the occupant of the forward section.

The latter, it seemed, had little baggage—nothing but a leather hat-box.

This he held in his hand until the porter had made up his berth. Then he stowed it in behind the curtains.

He walked to the front end of the car and disappeared.

Nick waited about ten minutes. Then he, too, leisurely strolled forward.

He very soon ascertained what had become of the man he was watching.

Belton had left the main car and had gone into the smoker.

Nick carefully scanned its interior before he entered.

It was a curious fact, but the present there was indulging in a smoke.

except the object of the detective's interest.

Nick quickly summed up the situation. He then coolly entered and amaciously seated himself beside Belton, with a careless remark about the weather.

The other responded courteously enough.

The detective drew out his cigar case.

"Have a smoke?" he said, politely.

"Thank you," smiled Belton, "but I don't indulge."

Nick did not urge him.

It was another proof of the correctness of his surmise that this man wished to keep out of his way.

To Nick it was apparent that a man who did not smoke would hardly leave the comfortable drawing-room car for a seat in the smoker, which is usually offensive to a man not fond of tobacco—unless he had some powerful motive in view.

The detective had to light his own cigar to keep up appearances.

"Excuse me," spoke Belton, abruptly, the moment he did so.

He arose and was out of sight in an instant.

Nick waited the length of time it would take to consume a cigar.

When he returned to the main coach he lingered very much interested at the swinging glass door connecting the vestibule corridor.

Four men of superior appearance, so far as evident wealth and contentment were concerned, occupied a section not far from the door.

They were discussing some subject animatedly. Nick caught a word here and there.

Belton had made himself agreeable with the quartette. He joined in the conversation, standing in the aisle.

Then he backed away from the four, and leisurely a few steps, and shot a glance along the car in front of him.

Nick's eyes were on him, but Belton had no means of knowing that.

His back to the four men, he suddenly drew from his pocket a tiny glass bottle.

He unscrewed the stopper of a miniature apothecary bottle. Belton understood his intention.

He stepped in a hurry, and dropped the

bottle back into his pocket, and went up to the four men again.

Belton smiled down at them as they sternly and earnestly argued some point, growing hot and excited in their discussion.

Nick pressed the glass door in an inch or two so he could listen.

"I'll bet a hundred dollars on that!" at this moment announced one of the quartette.

He excitedly drew out a plethoric pocket-book.

"I'll take it!" promptly proclaimed one of the others.

"Wait, gentlemen—wait!" broke in Belton, persuasively.

He pushed back the pocket-book, and he pressed back the taker of the bet, and in doing so his hand, as if by accident, grazed an exquisite diamond solitaire stud screwed into the man's shirt bosom.

They listened indulgently. Belton suggested that they had not precisely stated what their bet was.

"You make it plain," he directed to a third party, "so that there shall be no cloudy misunderstanding in the morning. See?"

The man addressed by Belton went on to make plain the points of the bet. Belton tallied off his statements with a pleasant word and an insinuating smile.

Meantime he quite casually seized and inspected a jeweled watch chain hanging from the speaker's fob.

Everything was settled. A flask was passed around and good-naturedly the quartette turned toward their respective sections.

Nick's brows drew together in a puzzled way.

What was the significance of Belton's apparently artless by-play?

Of a sudden Belton started for the end of the car where the detective was.

Nick could not get out of the passage way in time to evade a suspicion of spying or flight.

He boldly pushed the door open—Belton and he came fairly face to face.

"Ah, excuse me! I nearly ran into you," spoke the detective.

Belton only stared at him. Nick's face was as red as a beet.

With the utmost politeness he stepped into the next car and closed the door.

Belton came in, stroking his hands as if he had just been washing them.

He went to his section, parted the curtains and sat down on the edge of the berth.

He took off his brown Fedora hat and stood up wearing a light golf cap.

Again he went forward. When Nick followed after a lapse of time, he discovered Belton back in the smoker.

Nick entered it. Belton bestowed a sleepy, careless look upon him.

There were several other occupants—two of these were playing cards.

Belton drowsily watched them, smuggled up into a corner, and, his eyes apparently set on the flying landscape, he sat thus for a full two hours without moving a muscle.

Nick was galled at the state of inaction into which affairs had fallen.

Belton was acting queerly. He made no move to change his position.

It was getting on toward the small, wee hours of the morning.

"Is he going to stay here all night?" Nick wondered.

The two men had become tired of the cards, and were hurrying through the rubber game.

Nick was weary of feigning interest in their dull manipulation of the pasteboards.

He had assumed—and with a reason—that Belton had boarded that train to rob its passengers.

Why did he not proceed to work?

That funny by-play with the bottle and the three betting men was certainly preliminary to some scheme.

Nick had about concluded that no game would be pulled off that night, when the train made its first stop.

It was one of the three between New York and Chicago, and was so brief as to be scarcely noticeable.

Belton did not leave his seat. Nick went to the platform, but kept his eye on the strangely acting passenger.

The porter looked by him. He had a telegram in his hand.

He glanced at Nick and then stuck his head into the smoker.

"Any of you gentlemen Mr. B. Elton?" he asked, loud enough for Nick as well to hear.

"That's me," said Belton, promptly, and he put out his hand.

Nick's suspicions as to this man's identity were now perfectly assured.

Belton and "B. Elton" were too synonymous not to be apparent.

He even half guessed where that telegram came from.

Quick, shrewd action was necessary if he hoped to get a chance to read it.

Nick Carter, who noticed everything, had noticed, among other things, that just back of the convenient seat Belton had appropriated was a grating.

It let in on the heating closet in the end of the car.

Now, in the warm weather, the porter stowed his shoe-blackening outfit there on top of the heating coil.

Nick had noticed this, too.

Further, that the door was not locked.

Nick pulled this door open.

Unseen, unsuspected, he was not four inches away from Belton on the other side of the partition.

He squeezed against the coil, which pretty nearly filled the closet compartment.

Nick pressed his eyes close to the grating.

He could look right down, on a level with Belton's own.

The latter shot a keen glance about the smoker, and then tore off the envelope of the telegram.

He read it.

Nick Carter also read it.

The dispatch ran:

"The spotted print received. Offered nickel per box. The carter's hire is five dollars. Better return at once; but navigation still open at Bellevue."

Nick Carter "smelled a mice!"

CHAPTER VII.

"SMITH!"

It was not difficult for the skilled secret service expert to guess where that telegram came from.

In an instant Nick decided that the fellow hanging around the depot when the limited had started, and who had so closely watched himself and the railroad president, was responsible for its continuation.

Belton might only have scheduled Nick as "suspicious."

The sender of the telegram, however—a spy, an accomplice—must know him as the famous detective he was, and had apprised his partner on the wing.

That was probably a part of their scheme of watchfulness and cunning—at all events, Belton was warned.

It was easy to read between the lines of the dispatch.

The second word of every sentence was the key.

So, translated, it read:

"Spotted—Nick Carter."

Belton was enlightened as to the detective's presence on the train, even if he did not surmise it already.

He was advised to return; in other words, to call off the game for the present trip.

"Although," murmured Nick, with his splendid memory recalling verbatim every word he had read under difficulty—"Although 'navigation is still open at Belton.' What is that hint getting at?"

Belton gave himself a vigorous shake.

He did not, however, leave his seat. He tore the telegram into tiny pieces, opened the window a trifle, and cast the fragments to the winds.

"Here!" he said to the porter, tendering a coin.

The dusky fellow showed his ivories in an expansive grin.

The expression changed to a wild, astonished glare of his twitching eyeballs as he passed through the doorway.

Nick was just coming out of the closet.

The porter was about to vigorously challenge this unaccountable intrusion on his private rights with an outcry.

Nick reached his form and pulled him toward him. "Shut up!" he uttered, emphatically in his ear.

Nick also placed a second coin in the dusky hand.

"Yes, sir," whispered the porter, accommodatingly "shutting up!"

"Where is the conductor?"

"This way, sir," responded the porter, tiptoeing to the vestibule passage-way with a due sense of over-mysteriousness and caution.

At the other end of the car, in an un-

occupied stateroom, the conductor was busy tabulating his fare returns.

"Stay there a moment," said Nick to the porter.

The detective closed the door. He was alone with the conductor, who looked up, mildly surprised.

Nick was perfectly satisfied in his mind that whatever wholesale scheme of robbery was afoot, the train crew were not participants in it.

The keen, experienced student of physiognomy had been able to make out only one suspicious face in the whole train-load—that of Belton.

"Conductor," said Nick in a low tone, "I come from the president of the road."

The conductor bestowed a penetrating look on Nick.

"I think I understand," he nodded.

"I am—Nick Carter."

The conductor got up and took off his cap in a sudden fluster.

"Why, sir——" he began.

"Let us be brief," interrupted Nick, practically. "I am here on business."

"I know what—the thefts on the limited."

"Yes, I want you to do something to help me out."

"Assuredly."

"Let there be no commotion, nothing done to disturb or excite the suspicious of the criminal."

"He is aboard!"

"Of course. I want you to stay here and keep a general supervision over the coach."

"All right."

"I want you to direct the porter to go at his shoe-blackening task at the other end of the car."

"Pretty early for that!"

"Never mind. That will give him an excuse to hang around the door of the smoker."

"Oh!"

"And keep a sharp lookout."

"It shall be just as you say."

"He is to watch the man to whom he just gave a telegram."

"A man he gave——"

"He knows."

"Oh! he knows! Very good, Mr.——"

"Smith."

"Ha! I see—Smith!"

"He is to tell you at once if the person I allude to leaves the smoker."

"I don't see—of course you have your idea, sir——"

"Of course I have——"

"Beg pardon, then!"

"And don't notice or wonder at anything I do."

"You shall have free swing, Mr. Nick——"

"Smith."

"Ha! ha! Smith, yes! Count everything you mention done, Mr.—Smith!"

The conductor passed out of the state-room and began whispering animatedly and earnestly to the porter.

Nick brushed by him. He indeed had his idea! Mr. B. Elton warned, would be as wily as a fox, but Nick was planning to force his hand.

Nick went first to his berth, secured his satchel, opened the rear door of the coach, closed it after him.

The conductor saw him disappear, wondering where, but, remembering Nick's injunction, ceased staring and paid no further attention.

It was probably an hour later when the door again opened.

The conductor was still in the state-room.

Its rear door commanded the platform; through its other one, an inch ajar, he had evidently been pursuing Nick's mandate to keep the coach interior in view.

He jumped up with a shock—he stared at an unknown intruder.

"Who are you——" he began.

"I!" quieted the newcomer.

"Where did you come from?"

"Smith."

"How?"

"By the door."

"Disgraced! Say! I've read of it, but——it can't be you!" cried the conductor, in a tone of indignation and astonishment.

"It is I," declared Nick. "Resume your post, and there all——"

"Bye!"

"Don't go out that rear platform."

"Bye!"

"Under no circumstances."

"I never do. It's the fear of the train, except the private car."

"Except the private car?" murmured

Nick, significantly. "And allow no one else to go out there."

"Allow no one else."

"Under any circumstances."

"Under any circumstances—all right."

"Unless it is somebody with me."

"And then?"

"Be fast asleep!"

The conductor gave a little nervous shiver.

Detectives and mysteries were undermining all his discipline and poise!

"You're going to do something?" he inquired, trembling with excitement.

"I hope to—if some bungler doesn't stop me."

"It won't be me!"

"It won't, if you obey orders."

"Same as if the superintendent spoke them for you, Mr. Nick——"

"Smith."

"Smith—ha!—ha!—I'm mum!"

"That's right."

"Asleep if you come back with any one this way."

"Good! I shall mention it to the president of the road."

"You're a brick!" complimented the conductor. "Mr. Nick——"

"Smith."

Nick must have had felicitous surroundings to have perfected the superb disguise he had adopted.

There was not an essential left of the original detective—not even the minutest trace.

Nick was a common, every-day Western village bumpkin, with a little money, returning from his first trip East.

He directed the conductor to go forward, attract the attention of the porter, get a private word with him, and instruct him as to his part. The conductor returned with a bright nod.

"He's all right!" was his announcement.

"How about the man he was watching?"

"He has not stirred."

"Hain't left the smoker since I left him?"

"Not a step."

"Very good!" complimented the detective, aloud.

And to himself:

"If I can't get him up, I'll see if I can't get him down. He's the only one who can't be caught."

Nick meditated a test and a temptation—all for the benefit of Belton.

A minute later he staggered into the compartment and joining the smoker.

The porter was busy shining shoes, and whistling softly to himself.

Nick glanced sidelong into the smoker; the card players had retired from the scene; Belton was alone continuing his strange, persistent vigil.

Nick came upon the porter with a hiccough and a reel.

"Bless me—that you, sir!" hailed the porter, agreeable to instructions just received.

"Course—course it's me!"

"How did you enjoy your sleep in my own private bunk back of the state-room, sir?"

This was all for Belton's benefit.

"Great, great!" retorted Nick. "Say! was I very—very shot when I came aboard?"

"We carried you, sir."

"And hid me?"

"Couldn't think of allowing a gentleman like you to be seen in that condition, sir, by the general public, sir!"

"You're a brick, Porter?"

"Aye, your honor."

"Porter, Augustus, and I'll make it—make it right with you."

"Thank you, sir."

"Say, though—that's a warm one who woke me up."

"Woke you up?"

"Yes, he did."

"Who did?"

"'Nother passenger."

"When, sir?"

"Why, a little while ago."

"I don't think that, sir!"

"Don't I? Guess not! He's jolly, too—I had two bottles, and he got in among 'em. Say—"

"Excuse me, sir—the conductor is calling me."

The porter started away, and Nick abandoned himself.

He staggered into the smoker.

"Hello!" he hailed in friendly enthusiasm, tumbling upon the seat directly next to Belton.

The latter was wide awake. Therefore, stirred as he was, Belton had probably taken in the explanation afforded by the recent colloquy as to Nick's former in-

visibility and his present appearance on the scene, for all it pretended to be.

"Be a little careful, sir!" spoke Belton, bridling up and drawing away.

"What—what's the matter with you?" demanded Nick. "Say, friend! some one has got to talk to me!"

"You had better go to bed," advised Belton.

Nick noted that the criminal had not the remotest inkling of his identity.

"Conductor says that—porter shies off—nobody to talk to. Must—must talk! Go to bed? Huh! not much. I've got a conscience, I have!"

Belton was silent.

"I've got a conscience, I say!" repeated Nick.

"All right, all right," answered Belton, annoyedly.

"Say! you help me, will you?" questioned Nick, getting close and confidential, so that there should be no mistake but that the fumes of a mouthful of strong whisky rolled about in his mouth should produce its due effect on his victim.

"Help you in what?" demanded the bored Belton.

"Why, as I was telling the porter, fellow woke me up."

"What of it?"

"And I—ha! ha!—I put him asleep."

"You ought to be put asleep, too."

"Not—not with him in most stupendous—stupendous conglomeration—human life!"

"What are you talking about?"

"He drank too much—it made him sick. Wouldn't think it, either. Nice—nice fellow. Eye like eagle, voice like—like Demosthenes!"

Belton turned a full, sharp face on Nick, quick as lightning.

"Do you mean——?"

He rapidly described Nick Carter as he had been.

Nick Carter as he was assented volubly:

"That's him!"

"You got him drinking?"

"No, no—he got me drinking!"

"And you say he's a sick?"

"Sick as dog!"

"Is that all?" questioned Belton, arising to his feet.

"No. Out—out!"

"What?"

"Yes. Out—outside."

"Where outside?"

"Rear platform."

"What?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell this here train-load past—past fifteen minutes, isn't it?" demanded Nick in an injured tone. "Certainly! He wanted air—he was sick."

"So you said."

"I gave him air."

"You took him out on the platform?" questioned Belton, his baleful eye quivering hotly.

"Certainly—certainly."

"He is there now?"

"I opened vest—vest—vestibule door. Set him on setps. To get cool, to get air, see? That's it. Afraid he may go to sleep. See? If go to sleep, he might—might slide off steps. Where going?"

"I am going to see."

"I'll—I'll go, too."

"Never mind."

"What?"

"No—I'll attend to him."

Belton passed quickly out of view.

Nick rolled back on the seat.

The moment Belton was through the passage-way, however, Nick was on his feet.

Belton passed the porter, who was pretending to arrange a berth curtain, and also passed the conductor, who was "fast asleep" in the state-room.

Belton got out on the rear platform.

At that moment Nick Carter had gained the front platform, had opened the vestibule door, and swung from the step beyond to view the length of the car.

He could fancy a hiss of hatred, of triumph, as Belton discovered seated on the step the man he believed to be Nick Carter.

Knowing that, knowing him also as the man sworn to hunt down his friend and partner, the Spider—Belton must have felt that one tip forward would clear his path of every difficulty!

Nick peered back the swinging, dizzying course of the car.

He saw a form shoot from the rear steps—a form arrayed in the suit of clothes and the hat, that Nick Carter had worn on boarding the limited.

Belton had bit at the bait—had met the test, the temptation.

He had pushed "Nick Carter into eternity!"

CHAPTER VIII.

NABBED !

The detective sped back to the smoker.

He presently heard a movement that boded something—the footsteps of Belton returning.

Nick kept up the farce. He feigned the helpless inebriate, sprawling all over the seat.

Belton's face was ghastly as he came into view, yet a sparkle in his eye told that he counted himself a mighty victor, whatever the cost.

"Hello!" hailed Nick, "did—did you find him?"

"Gone," uttered Belton hoarsely.

"Man on steps?"

"No one there."

"There was."

"Then he got off."

"How get off, train going forty hundred miles hour?"

"Well, don't bother me with any more of your crazy ideas!"

"Crazy 'self! Insulted! Go 'way! I repudiate you!"

Nick straightened up with great dignity, and collapsed with a crash in a corner.

His meditated play was to now let Belton have full swing.

The key the railroad president had given him Nick had used to decided advantage.

Taking his satchel with him, Nick had turned that private car into a dressing-room indeed!

He had made up a dummy of paper and blankets, and had planted it on the rear platform of the coach.

His play had been effective—hat and clothing had deceived Belton.

The latter had been proven a thorough villain at heart; what was meant for cold-blooded murder had been executed with barely a qualm.

Belton had kicked a dummy out into the darkness, believing that to be the last of the feared and hated Nick Carter!

The detective had sacrificed a suit of clothes, but, if the rest of his plan suc-

ceeded, he would think the benefit thereby accruing cheap for the money.

He believed that, fancying Nick Carter out of the way, Belton would now proceed with his schemes of robbery.

He would have no further thought nor care for the boon companion of the bottles, for Nick was now ready to play the stupid, overcome drunkard.

He would wait till Belton got into his berth, till his peculations were in full swing, and catch him red-handed.

Nick was sinking into maudlin stupidity. Belton sat heedless of him, his eyes snapping, his hands working with excitement.

He did not seem to intend to return immediately to the main coach, as Nick had hoped.

Suddenly, above the grinding of the wheels there arose a sharp cry.

It was so sudden that Nick half-stayed a drunken plunge meant to stretch him finally out prostrate and mute.

Belton only turned his head with a languid, indifferent blink of the eyes.

"What—what's that?" demanded Nick, getting to his feet.

He staggered through the doorway of the smoker, and, out of sight of Belton, briefly traversed the vestibule passage-way.

Nick reached its end, and pushed the door open.

In the centre of the aisle stood a man, half disrobed.

He was fumbling at his shirt front, and he was shouting lustily.

"Conductor!" he yelled.

"What is it?" demanded that official, stepping forward.

"This car! I have been robbed!"

The porter also came rushing upon the scene.

"What's that, sir?—robbed!" he cried, indignantly.

"Yes, I have!" vociferated the man, and Nick recognized him as one of the quartette with whom Belton had been so familiar.

Nick heard Belton coming leisurely through the passage-way.

He drew back into his own berth, out of sight, but he watched and listened from behind the drawn curtains.

"My diamond stud!" continued the

aroused sleeper. "Do you see—torn out, right out of the shirt bosom!"

This was manifest—where the splendid solitaire had reposed was a mar, a rent, alone.

A yell interrupted the man as he was excitedly explaining.

From another berth a head was stuck out.

It was that of the man who had made the bet before retiring.

"Look here!" he shouted, "my pocket-book is gone!"

The conductor stood dazed.

There was a movement of a third pair of curtains.

The man whose jeweled watch seal Belton had casually played with, now came into view.

"Since you've woke me up," he said, more calmly than the others, "look at that!"

He showed a watch with a few shreds of its former fob ribbon appending, the glittering ornament gone with what of its main portion was missing.

"Gentlemen," stammered the conductor, "this is—is incredible!"

"Incredible, is it!" sharply snapped the man with the denuded shirt front, "aren't these cold, clear facts!"

"But—it would be impossible!"

"Don't talk rot!"

"I have been watching this car since you retired!"

"Well?"

"No person could possibly have visited three berths and done this work."

"Well, some person has!"

"It could not be! I have been aware of every movement in this car since midnight."

"I would suggest a search," said Belton, coolly, appearing on the scene. "Gentlemen, I am more fortunate—I had not retired."

"Had not retired, eh!" exclaimed the man robbed of the solitaire, and half suspiciously, but he checked himself.

"Maybe I stayed awake with a purpose," replied Belton, bluntly. "That's all right—mention it if you like, I would, in your fix. But, no—I fancy the porter here knows I haven't stirred from the smoker since you retired."

"That's so, sir, except for two minutes at the rear of the car, and I had you in

my eye all the while," asserted the porter with emphasis.

Nick Carter was astounded.

What Belton said was true—he could not possibly have taken any part in the robbery. Yet here were the facts—they were patent, undeniable.

The conductor was white with misery and mystery. The three men began exchanging experiences.

They were solaced only with the conductor's statement that the company would fix it up, and he advised them not to make a fuss about it.

Belton seemed immensely interested in the details of the robberies; the man who lost the diamond was the only one conscious of having been robbed, however.

"I felt a queer tug at my shirt bosom—a suffocating sensation at my chest," he narrated. "I woke up—stone gone."

Belton reiterated his invitation and exhortation to a search, but the conductor refused to sanction such a proceeding.

"It's magic!" he declared—"I was watching. No thief has visited those berths."

Nick did not put in an appearance. He was as fully mystified as the others—for the present.

But for a cool, sarcastic cynicism in Belton's manner, he would almost have decided that he had been misled as to this individual.

A certain stubbornness, however, made him adhere to his first suspicions.

There was no magic here, but mystery. Nick was determined to explore it.

At midnight dawn in the course of an hour. Nick kept his eye on Belton.

The latter consulted his watch. Nick saw him also glance over one of those detailed time-tables usually possessed only by engineers and conductors.

"I say, conductor," hailed Belton, as he turned to his berth, "are we on time?"

"To the minute, last station."

"Where are we now?"

The conductor opened the section not made up, and studied the flying landscape a few minutes.

"You passed Delmore," he reported.

"Yes, sir—the Delmore district."

"You have it right, sir," bowed the conductor.

The official's face was a puzzling map.

He could not make head or tail of anything.

He knew, however, that in some way Belton must be mixed up in the detective's operations, and he did not take his eye off him, till at last Belton got into his berth.

He stuck his head out between the curtains to address the porter, who was fixing up a curtain torn down by the excited owner of the stolen diamond.

"I say, porter! you want to look out for that drunken fellow who was in the smoker," he advised.

"Just so, sir," came the reply—"he's all right."

"Gone to bed?"

"Stumbled right into it, sir!"

The conductor stood up against the curtains of Nick's berth for a minute or two.

"Don't worry!" floated to his hearing.

"And don't start so," advised Nick, additionally—"everything is all right."

"I hope so!" muttered the official, moving off.

The detective felt that he had a difficult problem to solve before the light of morning dawned.

Property worth in the neighborhood of three thousand dollars had been stolen. Who had taken it?

Certainly not Belton personally, but—

Nick never floundered. There was mystery here that no amount of conjecture or theorizing would avail to exploit.

"I must keep right at work," he told himself. "I will nail this business at any hazard!"

Nick set mind and senses on that berth now occupied by Belton, and separated from his own by only a single inch of wood.

He discerned from certain rustling movements that Belton had not started to sleep.

He moved about constantly. Nick thought he heard him cautiously scan the double car windows.

The detective, for quite some time, set his own case—he continued a casual game on and about.

"What?" he murmured hoarsely, as he discovered something.

Held or caught in a net at one end, the other flapping free, was a white towel or napkin.

"A signal—I will wager my two eyes!" declared Nick Carter, spurring up.

Thenceforward the detective kept his glance fixed on that floating fragment of white. "Bellevue," muttered Nick. "'navigation still open at Bellevue,' the telegram to Belton said. And we are in the Bellevue district, are we? Have we arrived?"

The train gave a jerk—the frightful scream of a whistle cut the air.

The limited, due to stop three hundred miles farther on, jarred down to an alarm halt.

Nick heard the voices of conductor and porter in animated ejaculation.

"What's up?" called the latter.

"Obstruction or wreck."

"Why! say, sir! this is where we were flagged last week."

"Yes—the very same spot."

The conductor went outside. Nearly everybody in the car was awakened.

Nick remained at his window.

"Train in the habit of being stopped at this point, eh?" he soliloquized.

"Near 'Bellevue,' too!"

Nick kept his ear bent to catch out-

Finally he heard somewhat ahead, above the hissing of the steam:

"A big engine on the track!"

"And a big crowd!"

"Why, about it?"

"No one about, that I can see."

Nick kept his eye fixed on the fluttering piece of white cloth at the next window.

Suddenly, right up in the gloom and obscurity at the side of the car, a rough form seemed to rise, as if from the earth itself.

"Hush!" in Belton's throat, low and distinct.

"What's that?" subdued and prompt from the ghostly phantom.

Something was handed out—snatched from the car.

"Leather hat box!" breathed Nick.

The white streamer was drawn in—the window closed down.

Nick slipped from between the curtains, and gained the rear platform.

The train went a stone still in a rocky cut. The car felt the double track as it slid a clear space, and then hands and

aroused passengers had stepped out there, going ahead to see what the obstruction was.

It was on the other side that Nick had seen the mysterious visitor at Belton's car window.

Out upon that side, with the solid wall not three feet away rising sheer and black, Nick stepped.

He fancied he heard the gravel clink under the rear private car.

He was sure of it as he went its length, and he lifted himself to the rear platform and listened keenly.

"Yes, he's coming!" muttered Nick.

Belton's recent visitor, the detective estimated, was creeping under the bottom of the car, where his presence would not be observed.

But Nick had observed it—Nick, who now lay flat on the rear platform of the rear car.

Before he did that he had his plan, and he had unlocked the door right at hand.

Nick poised for a pounce, arms all ready, one foot anchored twistingly between a brake beam and a platform standard.

Clink—clink—the gravel continued to move.

Nearer and nearer came the sounds.

A human head, then a pair of shoulders, appeared, framed by the rails—Nick stooped, with arm outstretched.

He dug in his fingers like iron pincers—he lifted with all his giant strength.

"What! who!—"

"Landed!"

Nick drew up to the platform an amazed, a squirming human being.

His captive held in one hand Belton's leather hat-box.

His other ran to his waist as if for a weapon.

Nick dragged him to his feet, as he himself arose.

He turned the knob of the car door.

Then with a crash Nick Carter sent his captive half the length of the private coach, hat-box and all.

CHAPTER IX.

NICK CARTER'S CHAMPIONSHIP.

The man Nick had captured came down on the bottom of the car window.

Nick was at his side in a twinkling.

he would not trust to appearances—a pair of handcuffs encased the fellow's wrists.

Then the detective went to the door, locked it, and turned up a lamp he had left burning on his recent visit to the car.

Nick sat down in one of the superintendent's elegant arm-chairs.

The captive was really insensible. Studying his crime-crossed face, the detective recognized a character hardy as a road-agent, bold as a bank-sneak.

"Here is one important branch of the limited robbery business, that is sure," meditated the detective.

Nick looked around for the hat-box. It had whirled in between two rockers. He fished it out, and began an inspection.

"The deuce!" muttered the detective, as he lifted the cover.

An animal sprang out—Nick stared.

It was a tiny but wiry black-and-tan.

Nick, a lover of dogs, and an authority on class and pedigree, instantly recognized it as one of those Lancashire prodigies, now very rare both in England and in this country.

The intelligent creature was sprightly as a ball of electricity.

"Ah-h!" floated on the air—a moan, issuing from the lips of Nick's captive.

His eyes were fixed upon the detective in a dreadful way.

"How—how's this?" he faintly gasped.

"Pretty fair!" answered Nick, coolly.

"Would you like to get details from Number 'Three'?"

"Eh!" stared the man.

"Belton."

"Caught?" inquired the prisoner.

"Pretty near," assured the detective.

"Who—who are you?" fluttered the captive.

"Well—Nick Carter."

The fellow gave a groan, kicked out, rolled his eyes, and said expressively:

"Oh, murder!"

"Nearly as bad," nodded Nick, "for you're safe and tight. See here! That dog——"

"Well?"

"He's the robber, eh?" guessed Nick.

"You've hit it!"

"Belton rubs some strange chemical compound on his finger and touches what he wants. By and by the well-trained ani-

mal goes on a tour, fishes for plunder, and brings it to Belton's berth."

"That's the programme."

"A signal, a flag along the line, and you and others, ready posted, take the stuff and the dog till next trip."

"I won't deny it."

"Do you want to see Belton?"

"How did you get onto us?" inquired the fellow.

"Interested in me, are you?" smiled Nick.

"I wonder!"

"You'll have plenty of time to find that out from Belton."

"He isn't nabbed?"

"Oh, quite as good!"

Nick continued his exploration in the hat-box.

There was the nest of the remarkable accessory to Belton's thefts.

Below, stuffed in among the cotton, was a pocket-book, a watch charm, a diamond stud.

Nick pocketed these.

The dog he did not shut up again.

Its ears cocked comically, its sharp little eyes twinkling like stars, it had got upon a cushion, and seemed enjoying its freedom.

Nick found a key in the door of a linen closet. For safer keeping he locked the prisoner in it.

The train was just starting up, the obstruction cleared away, as Nick let himself out of the private car.

In the next coach, the interruption to travel and the exciting previous episode of the night had brought a good many passengers, dressed, out of their berths.

Some had declared it to be too near daylight to return to rest, and the porter had made up their sections for day travel.

Nick came into the coach looking for Belton.

He heard a sharp cry of amazement and alarm, and he looked down at his feet as something grazed them.

The wise, wily little animal, the dog, had in some way slipped out of the private car past Nick, had slipped into the present one when he entered.

Nick tried to catch it. He knew the cry had come from Belton.

The dog evaded him—when he looked up he made out Belton.

The latter recognized defeat the moment he saw the detective enter the car.

Nick had made a partial toilet in the private coach; except for clothing, he was no longer the pretended inebriate.

The presence of his animal helper with the detective must have fairly paralyzed Belton.

At all events, he had sprung into the upper berth of his section.

Nick rushed at him, wondering if Belton was vain enough to think of hiding through that awkward maneuver.

"Belton!" exclaimed the detective, just once, sternly.

A knife flashed out; Nick sprang at the berth and pushed it up.

Its edge caught the villain by the neck. One arm thrust out with the knife severed the bell rope, which Belton had just pulled to stop the train.

Nick grabbed the dangling end to jerk the "mistake" signal, baffling Belton's purpose.

He next caught at Belton's wrist, and the knife dropped to the floor.

Dragged forcibly down, Belton landed at the feet of his captor with a crash that half stunned him.

There was a period of excitement.

There followed one of explanations.

Nick felt that now he could relieve the anxieties of passengers and train-hands.

While the conductor and the porter clasped tightly the wrists of the defeated Belton, Nick returned the stolen property recovered and told his story.

They took Belton back into the private car and handcuffed him to his accomplice.

Nick had completed his part of the "limited" robbery.

Nick was now more particularly interested in winding up the affairs of Guild Benham, alias the Spider.

When they reached the second regular stop of the "limited," time was taken to land the two criminals in the local jail to be held till Nick called for them on his return.

"There will be four of you, then," said Nick, in parting with Belton.

"Four?"

"Yes—counting the dog."

"What's Number Three?"

"The Spider."

"And that dog?"

"The dog."

"Chicago is a big place!"

"You won't give me his address?"

"I!"

"Nor a hint to that stolen Murillo?"

"Ask me!"

"Why, Belton! you have done so already."

"Rot!"

"Don't you think it?"

"Rubbish!"

Nick Carter drew a memorandum-book from his pocket, and waved it gaily.

Belton turned ghastly.

"Wretch!" he howled.

Nick looked modest.

"Wizard!"

"Ah, that's better!" smiled Nick.

"Yes, Belton—you thought you had tossed it safely under a car seat."

"I did!"

"Retribution—irony of fate! your dog nosed it out."

Belton uttered a groan.

"The Spider's Chicago address is in it, the stolen Murillo is with him, and you shall have his company back to New York in a very few hours, though not probably in the superintendent's private car, nor even yet on the 'limited!' " said Nick Carter.

The detective arrived in Chicago that evening.

He had the Spider first and solely on his mind, but he decided to drop in on his gifted lady detective, Ida, on his way to the district where he believed the famous criminal to be in hiding.

Ida was the guest of Miss Grace Nordyke, the beautiful girl to whom Nick had saved a lover and a fortune from the wiles of this same Guild Benham.

Nick reached the home of his hostess and assistant with a lightsome heart, for his "double case" was turning out a prompt, stimulating, and a brilliant success.

A great surprise greeted the veteran detective.

CHAPTER X.

IDA.

"Miss Grace Nordyke?"

"Not at home."

"And her friend and guest——"

"They both went away just before dark, sir."

Nick Carter was a trifle disappointed. He had telegraphed his assistant Ida, that he was coming to Chicago—and why.

It was not like the brisk, enthusiastic little lady detective to be found missing from a post of duty.

"Do you know when they will return?" asked the detective.

"No, sir," answered the servant.

"Nor where they have gone?"

"Oh, yes! sir—Mr. Lester Burton—he is Miss Nordyke's future——"

"I understand."

"He sent a note—I know that. Then they went out."

"Probably to join him at some evening entertainment," remarked Nick.

"My dear Mr. Carter!"

Nick had just reached the street when a firm but friendly hand grasped his own.

"Why! Mr. Burton," exclaimed the detective.

"More surprised than pleased to see me?" rallied the young man, who owed his fortune and his happiness to Nick Carter's wonderful detective ability in the near past.

"Always pleased, Burton, but certainly surprised just now," confessed Nick.

"The reason? You always have one."

"Your beautiful fiancée——"

"Grace bless her!"

"And my charming lady assistant——"

"Ida—bless her, too!"

"Neither of them is at home."

"Why! they had arranged that I was to spend the evening with them, hoping you would arrive, so we could welcome you in company."

"That is singular!"

"That is singular!"

"And the servant says, in obedience to a note received from you."

"Tell me?" cried Lester Burton in surprise.

"Mr. Carter—wait!"

A female servant came into the young man's study. The detective's eyes expressed astonishment as well as surprise.

"She has just come from the house. Her mistress has just received a note from you."

"What note?" he asked. "There is something wrong here!"

"What note, sir?"

"None."

"Then——"

"The servant says one arrived. Then the young ladies went out. Your telegram to Ida from New York——"

"To look out for the Spider?"

"Yes!" nodded Burton, breathlessly.

"You fear it connects?"

"What do you think?"

"Come with me—we shall soon find out."

Nick called a cab, gave a low-voiced direction to its driver, and hustled his companion into the vehicle.

Nick shared Burton's fears. A forgery had been committed—of course for some purpose, and of course for no legitimate one.

The Spider was in Chicago—that Guild Benham, whose life was devoted to seeking revenge against the man he had wronged, Lester Burton.

If he could decoy his fiancée, his bride so soon to be, by fair means or foul, what greater satisfaction could he ask!

That was a silent half hour, that swift drive, for Nick was thinking deeply. Burton was oppressed with dread anxiety and apprehension.

The cab stopped at last. Nick alighted.

"Why have you come here?" asked Lester Burton, recognizing a hard neighborhood of the city.

"Because it is here we must look for Miss Nordyke," replied Nick.

"You do not think that Grace could visit this locality after dark, unless——"

"No matter how or why," interrupted Nick, "it is here or hereabouts that we shall find the Spider."

"Great heavens! if he should have imprisoned her, carried her away——"

"That is the house."

Nick paused, after a brief walk, before a structure designated in Burton's memorandum book.

Its dark and forbidding front, its wretched surroundings, caused the detective's companion to shudder visibly.

"Come!" whispered Nick.

Like phantoms they stole up the dark stairs.

"The next floor," directed Nick, resuming the ascent.

"Listen!"

"A crash!"

"Mr. Carter——"

But Nick was following the guiding echoes of that ominous sound.

Up to a room through the transom of which a light gleamed. His quick eyes scanned the numbers it bore.

"The room!" he said.

"The Spider's room?"

"Yes."

"The sound came from there?"

"Burst in the door!"

"One—two—three!"

The door flew from its hinges.

"Grace!" cried Lester Burton.

He sprang forward with a wild cry, his arms tenderly outstretched.

The hand of a veiled figure waved him back.

"Not Grace!" came from behind the crepe folds.

"Why——"

"Ida," said the detective, and the veil went up.

Nick Carter's energetic assistant nodded calmly.

"What are you doing here?" asked Nick.

"The Spider."

"I don't see him——" began Burton, glancing wonderingly about the apartment.

"There!"

"Where?"

"Under that wardrobe."

A heavy piece of oaken furniture lay front down on the floor.

It was this that had made the crash.

"The Spider is under there?" inquired Nick.

"Under there or in there, yes," assured Ida, coolly.

"Explain!"

"Get him out first. He will be interested in hearing all about it!" smiled Ida, a little maliciously.

It was the Spider, sure enough, that Nick and Burton unearthed, half stunned, from among the disordered contents of the wardrobe.

They held him in—a chair, weak and crestfallen enough, while Ida resumed speaking.

"He sent a note, signed by Mr. Burton," said Ida. "Grace detected it to be a forgery—I guessed out the forger."

"Wise Ida!" commended Nick.

"I placed her with a friend, I assumed

her dress, and allowed the decoy to work."

"Risky, Ida!"

"Does it look so?"

"Not now, contemplating the result."

"I was working for this result!" announced Ida, with spirit. "I got here, led by the messenger, who pretended he was taking me to Mr. Burton."

Nick nodded comprehendingly.

"Then that fellow revealed himself. He addressed me as 'Grace,' said he had made a find worth a fortune. I insisted on knowing the details; he said, a picture."

"A Murillo!" murmured Nick.

"I insisted on seeing it. He fancied he was dazzling me! There it is—on that table."

A wooden roller wound with canvas reposed where Ida pointed.

"He thought he had won my—Grace's—consent to marry him. He went to the wardrobe for something—I am pretty strong!"

"Yes, Ida."

"I—caged him!"

Nick Carter made a double delivery on his double case in New York city, three days later.

To old Isaac Swartz he returned the priceless Murillo.

To the railroad company he turned over the prisoners he had run down so briefly, though so sensationally.

The notorious Spider was behind the bars at last—in the company of "the man in the smoker who didn't smoke!"

[THE END.]

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